

January is Birth Defects Prevention Month

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In the United States, about 150,000 babies are born each year with birth defects according to research by the March of Dimes. In 2002, 968 Kansas parents received the news that their newborn infant had a birth defect.

A birth defect is an abnormality of structure, function or metabolism (body chemistry) present at birth that results in physical or mental disability, or is fatal. Several thousand different birth defects have been identified. For the past 20 years in the United States, birth defects have been the leading cause of infant mortality, accounting for one in five infant deaths.

Birth defects result in substantial costs for the family and society relating to medical health care costs, special education, mental health care, caregiver time and impact on family structure. March of Dimes estimates for hospital stays by infants with cardiac or circulatory birth defects-- the most common type of birth defect-- hospital charges averaged \$80,000. Associated costs of physician care and other outpatient medical services are not included in this figure.

Some birth defects are preventable. There are steps that women can take to decrease their chance of having a baby with a birth defect. Every day, all women of childbearing age should take a multivitamin that contains 400 micrograms (400mcg or 0.4mg) of folic acid. Folic acid consumption reduces the risk of having a baby with spina bifida, and possibly other birth defects including cleft lip or palate and heart defects. All women should be appropriately immunized. Exposure to rubella in the first trimester of pregnancy can cause serious heart, hearing and vision defects. Public education campaigns to prevent or reduce high-risk behaviors such as smoking, drinking, poor nutrition, and late (or no) prenatal care offer hope for decreasing the number of families affected with birth defects. However, more work needs to be done to support these important prevention messages as well as treatment and care options, including early intervention services for children and families affected by birth defects.

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